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ABSTRACT

This paper overviews the organization, objectives and impact of an experimental interdisciplinary training program at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, for preparing specialists to work with infants and preschool children. (Author/RH)

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THE SCHWARTZ GRADUATE PROGRAM FOR TRAINING DIRECTORS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS IN COMMUNITY CENTERS

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TRAINING A NEW PROFESSIONAL CORE TO WORK WITH INFANTS, TODDLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES - THE SCHWARTZ PROGRAM

by

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INTRODUCTION

A large number of studies in recent years have demonstrated the impact which a "quality" educational environment may have on the development of infants, toddlers and young children. Many of the studies have indicated that the crucial factor in such a "quality educational program is the responsive adult who assumes care of the child.

An experimental interdisciplinary training program was founded at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel, to prepare specialists to work with the very young child, from birth to ages 3 and 4. The organization, objectives, and impact of the program will be examined in the following paper.

The vital necessity for such a training program in Israel is highlighted by several factors:

(a) Approximately 70% of the entire population of 2 year olds in Israel now spend anywhere from 4 to 8 hours daily in group settings outside their homes (primarily in day care centers). The Ministry of Education only assumes responsibility for settings which serve children who are at least 3 years of age. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs provides services primarily to families and children "in distress". Most Teacher Training Programs prepare their teachers to work with children of 3 years and above, whose abilities and developmental needs are different from those of infants and toddlers. Many of these teachers find it difficult to generalize from their training, to the specifics and demands of work with infants and toddlers.

(b) The special qualifications or requirements are demanded of those who care for very young children. Several surveys

of day care centers in the country show that approximately 70% of the caregivers have only minimal education (8 years), and no specific training or preparation for the job. This figure rises to 90% in rural areas and "development towns". The low salary and status, as well as poor working conditions, result in a high rate of personnel turnover and make most attempts at in-service training, extremely difficult.

(c) During the past 30 years, Israel has had to absorb large waves of immigration from a myriad of different cultures, with a large proportion of the immigrants coming from under-developed backgrounds. Today, Israel is struggling with the issue of a growing "social gap". Early intervention with the very young and their parents in disadvantaged communities may help in dealing with this issue, provided that the manpower is trained to deliver sich interventions which will focus on parents as well as children.

These 3 central factors imply the acute need in this country for trained personnel who can develop "quality programs" for infants and toddlers, and work with para-professionals and parents especially in poor neighborhoods.

CRGANIZATION

In an attempt to meet the above mentioned needs, a training program was opened in 1975 at the Hebrew University, under the auspices of the School of Social Work and the School of Education. It was initially funded by a grant from Unicef, and is now fully supported by the American Joint Distribution Committee.

In designing such a program, several issues arose. Among them were: a) Who should be trained - what were the appropriate qualifications and employment experiences? b) What form should the training take - should both academic and field work experiences be provided? c) On what format

should the nature of the curriculum be structured - should it focus on Education, Social Work or Psychology? d) If interdisciplinary training is offered - how should it be done? The key factor that dictated many of the directions the program took, was the decision to train for leadership roles. The goal is to train a core of professionals who will assume the responsibility for training others - para-professionals and non-professionals. Within this role,,he will be trained to consider the needs of parents, as well as being aware and able to meet the needs of young children. In addition, he will have the knowledge and skill to initiate and develop innovative programs for this population.

The Early Childhood Track of the Schwartz Program is now a one year, graduate, diploma-awarding program. The curriculum is interdisciplinary in nature. Students are expected to spend 3 days a week in academic work, and 3 days a week in supervised field work. This is supplemented by special workshops, study-trips and intensive seminars. The content of the curriculum attempts to provide knowledge, attitudes and skills in the areas of working with infants and toddlers, their parents, para-professional workers and the community at large.

Over the past 4 years, the program has been monitored and changes based on feedback have been introduced. Monitoring has taken the forms of a) program evaluation sessions with each group of students, b) marathon evaluation sessions with supervisory and teaching staff, c) discussions with employers of graduates, d) interviews with graduates.

In the area of program development, certain objectives were modified, after considering restrictions of time limits and candidates available. Courses and fieldwork experienced are continually being developed and enriched. Foremost, there has been an emphasis placed on developing a strong supervisory and teaching staff.

Considering the needs of training and the special needs of graduates in the field, 2 further developments were introduced. a) A Continuing Education Program was designed to provide intensive courses, one-day workshops, study field trips and organized group discussions, all geared to the needs of graduates in the field. b) A Resource Center was also established and serves students, graduates and other professionals. The center 1) contains a library of relevant publications, 2) collects and develops audio-visual materials for use in teaching, work with parents and primarily in the training of para-professionals and 3) collects case material from graduates' experience in the field for analysis and teaching purposes.

Ideas for the future which have not yet been fully developed are: 1) developing a model center for working with infants and toddlers, 2) developing a setting for "apprenticeship" for graduates who need additional supervised experience before assuming leadership roles.

MONITORING THE IMPACT

The program has not yet acquired the facilities to evaluate its impact on the development of children in programs run by graduates, attitude changes of parents or staff, and community commitment. Currently, only anecdotal information is available in terms of early identification and intervention of children "at-risk", and of parents who have extended their involvement and become more vocal leaders in their communities as a result of their involvement in an early childhood program. However, there are global indices which document the potential impact of the graduates on the "field of child care for the very young" in Israel.

In July, 1979 information was gathered from the first 3 graduating classes (50 graduates), who have been in the

field between 1 - 3 years. Several areas were investigated.

A) What is the rate of employment in Early Childhood Programs?

Forty-five graduates, (90%), are presently working in the field. The majority are working with children 1 - 3 years of age, some with 3 - 4 year old, and very few with 4 - 5 year olds. Most are tending to work with "young families" with only 2 - 3 children, with a goal of long-term involvement.

This is a very high rate of employment and a significant finding in that it is reflective of both the professional motivation of the graduates, as well as the readiness of the field to absorb them. One must also consider that no special professional employment slot was awaiting them - as it is for teachers or social workers.

B) Are Leadership Roles Actually Filled?

Leadership roles were defined as those in which the graduate contributed to the development of innovative approaches to program planning for young children and their families. The graduate was also expected to be actively involved in teaching, training and supervising para-professionals.

We found that 29 out of 45, (65%), of the graduates were actively involved in programming. Characteristics of such programs were: investment in staff development, improving methods of adult interaction with children, utilizing methods to increase staff stability, and motivation and awareness of the unique, individual needs of children. Emphasis was also placed on designing programs to bring about increased parental involvement with their children. Sixty-five per cent of the graduates were engaged in roles as trainers and supervisors of professionals and para-professionals in the field. This includes supervising staff in day care centers, and family day care homes. Graduates offer training within the framework of high school courses, and through Teachers' Seminars. They also offer supervision to new students and

new graduates within the training program.

C) Where Are the Graduates Working?

The impact of the program is bound to be limited if the graduates concentrate in one or two big cities and only work for 1 or 2 organizations. Although a relatively high proportion work in poor neighborhoods in the cities, we found others working in 17 locations (mostly development towns) throughout the country, from Hazor in the Northern Galilee, to Dimona and Eilat in the South.

While 35% of the graduates are working in community center settings, others were working in 16 different organizations, institutions and public services.

CONCLUSION

These findings suggest the potential impact and reinforce the assessment of a great need for this type of professional in the field of Early Childhood Care in Israel.

The objectives that directed the program at its inception still reflect and parallel the existing needs in the field. We feel that the nature of its impact justifies the major decisions taken vis-a-vis the content of curriculum, interdisciplinary structure, and the focus on training for leadership roles - "training of the trainers". What is needed now is a thorough objective and in-depth evaluation of this work on the functioning of early childhood programs, and the effects on the lives of the children's families.